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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ABU DHABI 003527

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STATE FOR NEA/ARP

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/14
TAGS: PINR PGOV TC
SUBJECT: UAE First Lady: Behind-the-Scenes Player

Ref: (A) USDAO Abu Dhabi R 291232Z Sep 04, (B) Abu Dhabi
3410

(U) Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison, reasons 1. 4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: First Lady Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak Al Kitbi is a key political player and will likely remain so even after UAE President Sheikh Zayed departs the scene. She has succeeded in promoting her six sons to key positions of power and influence, including her oldest son, Mohammed, who will likely become UAE President in the decades to come. Sheikha Fatima is the most prominent female figure in the UAE and we expect her to continue to exercise influence. Her stated goal of getting UAE national women to sit in the Federal National Council (FNC) is likely to be realized soon after her husband's death. Her encouragement and advocacy on behalf of women over the years have empowered the younger generation of Emirati women, who are gradually making their influence felt in the UAE economy and society. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (C) Fatima Bint Mubarak Al Kitbi was born in the vicinity of the city of Al Ain in the Eastern Region of Abu Dhabi Emirate. Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan reportedly saw his future bride during a traditional dance. Sheikha Fatima married in her mid-teens and bore her eldest

son, Mohammed (now Abu Dhabi Deputy Crown Prince and Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces), in March 1961. She would have been no more than 16 years of age, and possibly younger. Her official biography calls her a pioneer in supporting women's causes and women's education in the UAE since the 1960s. Fatima's passports contain the stamp "purdah female," and indeed there apparently exists only one photograph of the First Lady in the public domain. (Note: Our contacts say Sheikha Fatima is illiterate, although her CV states that she has studied the Quran, as well as arts and human science fields, concentrating on poetry and philosophy, history, politics and diplomacy. End note.) By 1973, she had established the Abu Dhabi Women's Association, and by 1975, while still in her 20s, she had founded the UAE General Women's Union (GWU), the foremost women's organization in the country.

The Bani Fatima

¶3. (C) After Mohammed, Sheikh Zayed and Sheikha Fatima had seven more children together (Note: Sheikh Zayed has had a total of 19 sons and 10 daughters by different wives. End note.) Mohammed's siblings are brothers Hamdan (b. 1963), Haza'a (b. 1965), Tahnoun (b. 1969), Mansour (b. 1971), and Abdullah (b. 1973), and sisters Shamma (b. 1967) and Ilyazi (b. 1968). The six sons are collectively known as the Bani Fatima, or sons of Fatima. They effectively control the key portfolios in the UAEG today, including defense, security, information, and foreign affairs. Mohammed, the eldest, is second in line behind half-brother Khalifa, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Emirate, to succeed their nonagenarian father, whose health is increasingly precarious.

The most influential wife

¶4. (C) Sheikha Fatima is the fifth of Sheikh Zayed's nine wives, and is the only wife referred to in the press. Locals and expatriates refer to her as Sheikh Zayed's favorite and official wife. She is certainly the most powerful and influential. As the mother of the Bani Fatima, she has worked successfully behind the scenes to promote her sons to key positions of power. Mohammed, who has been Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces since 1993, controls the military. In November 2003, Zayed appointed him Deputy Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, a move Sheikha Fatima and her progeny orchestrated. The decree appointing Mohammed clarified the presidential succession with the explicit stipulation that Mohammed would become Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi when that post became vacant. Mohammed also is the chief adviser to the President on National Security, member of the Abu Dhabi Supreme Petroleum Council, board member of Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, member of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council, and President and Patron of the think tank Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR). On October 4, he was named Honorary Chairman of the Higher Committee assigned to coordinate economic policy, program, and plans among the seven emirates.

¶5. (C) Sheikha Fatima's second oldest son, Hamdan, has been Minister of State for Foreign Affairs since 1990. As the UAE's de facto Foreign Minister, Hamdan is the USG's primary interlocutor on our bilateral relations. In September 2003, Hamdan was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, again with lobbying from Sheikha Fatima, most observers acknowledge. There is speculation that after Zayed's death, the Bani Fatima will engineer the process so that Hamdan becomes Deputy Crown Prince. What role Sheikha Fatima would play in such a scenario is open to question. Others speculate that Crown Prince Khalifa will attempt to appoint his son Sultan Bin Khalifa as Deputy Crown Prince. Hamdan also is Chairman of Dolphin Energy Ltd., President of UAE Red Crescent, Deputy Chairman of the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, and Director of Abu Dhabi Fund for Arab Economic Development.

¶ 16. (S) Haza'a has been Director of Abu Dhabi State Security since 1992. Like his brothers Mohammed and Hamdan, Haza'a is a strong proponent of bilateral cooperation with the U.S. We do not know to what extent his mother played a role in his appointment. However, Haza'a is very close to Mohammed. This month, as he did last year, Haza'a is visiting Washington to discuss counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing at the NSC, CIA, FBI, and State. We also do not have details of Sheikha Fatima's involvement in the appointments of her sons Tahnoun, Mansour, and Abdullah, who control Zayed's private fortune, access, and information. Tahnoun is Chairman of the Private Department, which looks after Sheikh Zayed's personal investments and foreign properties. Mansour is director of Sheikh Zayed's office, making him the son with the most access to his father. Mansour also is Deputy Chairman of the Sheikh Zayed Charitable Foundation. Abdullah, the Minister of Information and Culture since 1997, controls the national news agency, WAM, and is Chairman of Emirates Media Incorporated, which owns Abu Dhabi TV and the main Abu Dhabi Arabic language daily, Al Ittihad.

¶ 17. (C) In addition to being a power broker, Sheikha Fatima has established her primacy among wives in Abu Dhabi. Those who know her say she is a very smart woman who doesn't miss a thing, and has natural dignity and charming modesty. Around the UAE, Sheikha Fatima's popularity derives from her enormous generosity, and some say, from her relatively humble origins. "People like the fact that she is from a small tribe and is not educated," a local scholar told us.

¶ 18. (C) The question is, what becomes of Sheikha Fatima's political influence after her husband dies. He is reportedly in precarious health (ref B). We see her role diminishing somewhat because her sons already are in positions of power and influence, with Mohammed seemingly secure in the succession line. While there is some speculation that Sheikh Zayed's immediate heir, Crown Prince Sheikh Khalifa, may try to rejigger some appointments to undercut the Bani Fatima's power, we think that scenario is unlikely. One plausible future role for Sheikha Fatima - and this, too, will be behind the scenes - will be to groom Sheikha Salaama, Mohammed's wife, as future First Lady.

Initiatives in politics and education

¶ 19. (C) For years Sheikha Fatima has advocated a greater role for women, including their inclusion as members of the Federal National Council (FNC), which is responsible for examining and amending all proposed federal legislation. "There is nothing to prevent women from entering the political arena. They have all the support they need from the president and the rulers of the various emirates. The constitution guarantees their rights," she said in an interview with Al Ahram Weekly in May 2003 during a visit to Cairo. "Soon we shall see women in the positions of ministers in parliament, where they can continue to play a role in serving society," she added.

¶ 10. (U) Sheikha Fatima also has pushed hard to improve the status of women in the field of education, and to eliminate illiteracy. At the university level, 57 percent of graduates are women. In the labor force in 2000, there were 75,683 women employed in various jobs, according to the GWU. This figure doubled in five years; in 1995, it did not exceed 18,144 women. Illiteracy, which once exceeded 75 percent of the population, has now been almost eradicated. According to the GWU, 88 percent of Emirati women are now educated. (Note: The GWU she founded reviews and offers opinions on all draft laws concerning women and children. End note.)

Stands to inherit a fortune

¶11. (S) Sheikha Fatima's financial future appears very secure as she stands to inherit billions of dollars. Sheikh Zayed's personal wealth is estimated at \$64 billion (ref A). Sheikha Fatima is expected to receive \$8 billion with the remainder of the estate divided among the sons in equal shares and to the daughters in half shares. Each of Zayed's sons will receive two equal shares and each daughter one share of the remainder of the estate.

Comparison with other Gulf First Ladies

¶12. (C) In contrast to most other First Ladies in the region, Sheikha Fatima is a public figure. However, she only appears in the presence of women. When the all-women's Zayed University hosted Sheikha Fatima at last spring's graduation ceremony in Abu Dhabi, the college had to cordon off its campus, and Sheikha Fatima's security detail stood guard on the perimeter to ensure that no men - not even the students' fathers and brothers - entered the premises. According to an attendee, Sheikha Fatima sat and listened as someone read the speech that was written for her.

Not everyone is a fan

¶13. (C) While most acknowledge Sheikha Fatima's power and influence in the UAE, and applaud her contributions to various charities and her stated support of women's causes, there are those who say she tends to be arrogant and to look after her own. In some circles, people refer to her and the Bani Fatima derogatorily as a "secret committee" that takes important decisions related to security, foreign affairs, and information. Some critics do not like that she and the Bani Fatima act as Sheikh Zayed's gatekeepers ensuring that no one speaks to him without their approval. Whenever the ailing president has been in the hospital, one of his sons, and often Sheikha Fatima, has always been there.

¶14. (C) Some Emiratis also question Sheikha Fatima's ability to carry out the kinds of reforms she talks about in her speeches, including giving women a greater role in politics. These same interlocutors say the GWU could have done a lot more to advance the conditions of women in its 30-year existence. "They promote women's handicrafts," and little else, lamented one of our regular contacts. From our own visits to GWU headquarters in Abu Dhabi, we can confirm that it is little more than a showcase for Sheikha Fatima's individual accomplishments. About 10 years ago, Sheikha Fatima named a female UAE University professor as her advisor at the GWU, but she reportedly rejected the advisor's plans for creating a forum for UAE intellectual women and refused to fund research. The advisor was not satisfied serving as a protocol chief and organizing celebrations, and returned to her teaching job. Some of our contacts have told us that once a woman enters Sheikha Fatima's entourage, she effectively gives up her personal life. "It is difficult to live near a sheikha. You cannot do anything she does not approve of. You have no say," a contact said.

¶15. (C) If Sheikha Fatima is so influential, why is it that after so many years of advocacy, there isn't a single woman sitting in the FNC, our contacts ask. (Note: The FNC's 40 members are all appointed. End note.) One of our political contacts has stated in the past that the first political reform in the UAE should be to establish an elected legislature to replace the FNC's appointed body. The second reform, which could take place simultaneously, would be to include women, our contact said. Although a visionary leader with regard to economic and social policy and the UAE's strategic interests, Sheikh Zayed was deeply conservative politically. It will remain to her sons to

push for more political openness.

Comment

¶16. (C) How much Sheikha Fatima's star diminishes after Sheikh Zayed's eldest son, Crown Prince Khalifa, assumes the presidency remains to be seen. In any event, Khalifa's wife Shamsa Bint Suhail Mazrouie, who is Sheikha Fatima's expected successor as First Lady, will have a difficult time topping Sheikha Fatima's reputed popularity among UAE nationals.

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